



# 2013 Military Family Lifestyle Survey

## Executive Summary



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# Foreword

May 1, 2013

The unique military lifestyle is in some ways a world that must be lived to be known, but must be shared to be understood. Surveys are one way to provide insight into the challenges and the strengths of our nation's military families. Now in its fourth iteration, the **Blue Star Families'** Military Family Lifestyle Survey highlights the experiences of our military community after more than a decade of war.

With new budget uncertainties, it is more important than ever to make sure we have innovative, effective programming and collaborative partnerships to support our military families. One avenue established in support of such efforts is the *Joining Forces* initiative, launched by First Lady Michelle Obama and Dr. Jill Biden to raise awareness about the service, sacrifice, and needs of our nation's service members, veterans, and military families.

*Joining Forces*, now in its second year, has highlighted the value of partnerships and collaboration in the way ahead. For example, when *Joining Forces* was first launched in February 2012, only 11 states had legislation with key measures to support military spouses on the books. Now, that number is 29 states and growing. And, in response to concerns about our military children's ability to pursue their education, the National Math and Science Initiative (NMSI) is expanding Advance Placement courses in high schools with large military populations. This gives military children in 52 public high schools across 15 states a chance to earn college credit. By this fall, this initiative will expand to 80 schools across 20 states, with the ultimate goal of reaching 250 military connected schools.

These successes demonstrate the importance of partnerships and the spirit of collective action. The public, private, and non-profit sectors all have an important piece of the puzzle and so too do our local communities. It will continue to take strategic collaboration, based on quantifiable research like this survey, to translate goodwill into measurable outcomes that benefit our military community and strengthen our nation.

We encourage you to take the findings and analysis of these results and seek out ways to make a difference within your own community. Thank you to **Blue Star Families** and to the organizations that helped to distribute the survey.



Deanie Dempsey  
Blue Star Spouse and Mom



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*The full report is available at [www.bluestarfam.org](http://www.bluestarfam.org)*

### Background

Despite the drawdown of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the United States will continue to rely on an all-volunteer military for global stability and security for the foreseeable future. **The Blue Star Families** Military Family Lifestyle Survey takes a proactive look at the current needs and priorities of military families and service members and what can be done to support them. The goal of the survey is to provide concrete data and information about prominent aspects of the military lifestyle so that decision-makers can make informed choices on their behalf. After all, the first step in recognizing the unique and substantial contributions military families make to this nation's security and collective strength is to understand their perspectives and experiences while serving.

Each year, **Blue Star Families** collects data and disseminates the results enabling stakeholders to address military families with a timely and relevant perspective. In doing so, decision-makers may be able to create targeted efforts for better reception, applicability, and successful outreach to military families in communities across the nation and around the world. This executive summary details the major results and analysis of the fourth annual **Blue Star Families** Military Family Lifestyle Survey.

For this survey, **Blue Star Families** was honored to have the following partner organizations: The American Red Cross, The Armed Forces YMCA, Association of the United States Army (AUSA), Hiring our Heroes, Military.com, the Military Child Education Coalition (MCEC), Military Officers Association of America (MOAA), the Military Spouse Corporate Career Network (MSCCN), Military Spouse Magazine, National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS), National Military Family Association (NMFA), Operation Homefront, Our Military Kids, Points of Light, Reserve Officer Association (ROA), Student Veterans of America (SVA), USAA, the United Service Organizations (USO), Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW), and the Armed Forces Services Corporation.



The widespread distribution of this survey through our partners and others in the military community greatly contributed to the high level of response and helped achieve a comprehensive sample of military personnel and their families.

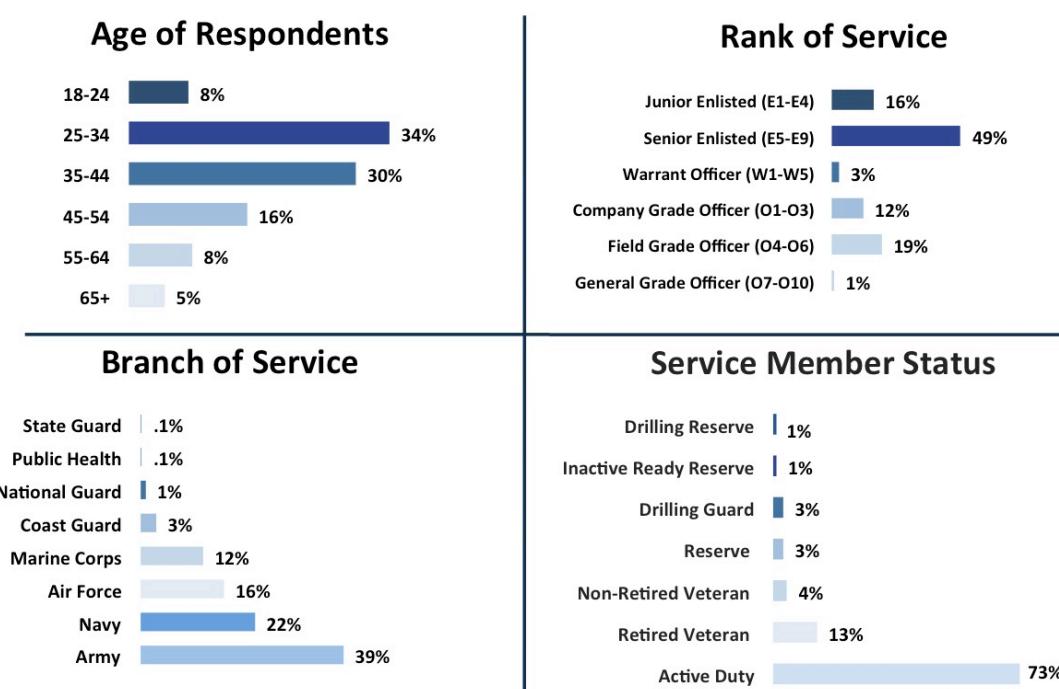
## Survey Respondents

The survey was administered online and generated a self-selected, convenience sample. The respondents to this survey represented a diverse cross-section of military family members from all branches of services, ranks, and regions, both within the United States and on overseas military installations. Survey respondents were asked to identify their primary relationship with the military based on the service member through whom they receive DoD benefits, if applicable. Of the 5,125 military family members who started the survey, 62% (3,153) completed the entire questionnaire. In total, there were 143 questions possible.

Sixty percent of the survey's respondents had more than one immediate family member affiliated with the military, and 73% were military spouses (i.e., they were married to a service member from any branch of service at the time they took the survey). Sixteen percent of the respondents were service members, 6% were parents, and 4% were children of service members.

Seventy-four percent of the survey respondents were affiliated with active-duty military personnel, 3% percent were affiliated with the Reserve, and 5% with the Drilling Guard, Drilling Reserve, or the Inactive Drilling Guard. Thirteen percent were affiliated with retired veterans, and 4% with non-retired veterans. Sixty-five percent of respondents were affiliated with enlisted service personnel, and 5% of survey respondents resided on overseas military installations. Survey respondents residing in the United States, while fairly evenly distributed across the country, were slightly more concentrated in the Southeast and West, reflecting areas with a large military presence.

Eighty-four percent of respondents were female, and 67% of respondents had minor children living at home. Seventeen percent of respondents identified themselves as a minority race or ethnic group. Thirty-eight percent had completed an associate's degree or less, and 30% had completed a bachelor's degree. Sixty-four percent of survey respondents were between the ages of 25 and 44.



\*Due to rounding, percentages add up to more than 100%

These demographics outline a diverse group of individuals from a variety of backgrounds, drawn together by their commitment to service and the experiences they share of supporting someone in the military.

## Survey Highlights

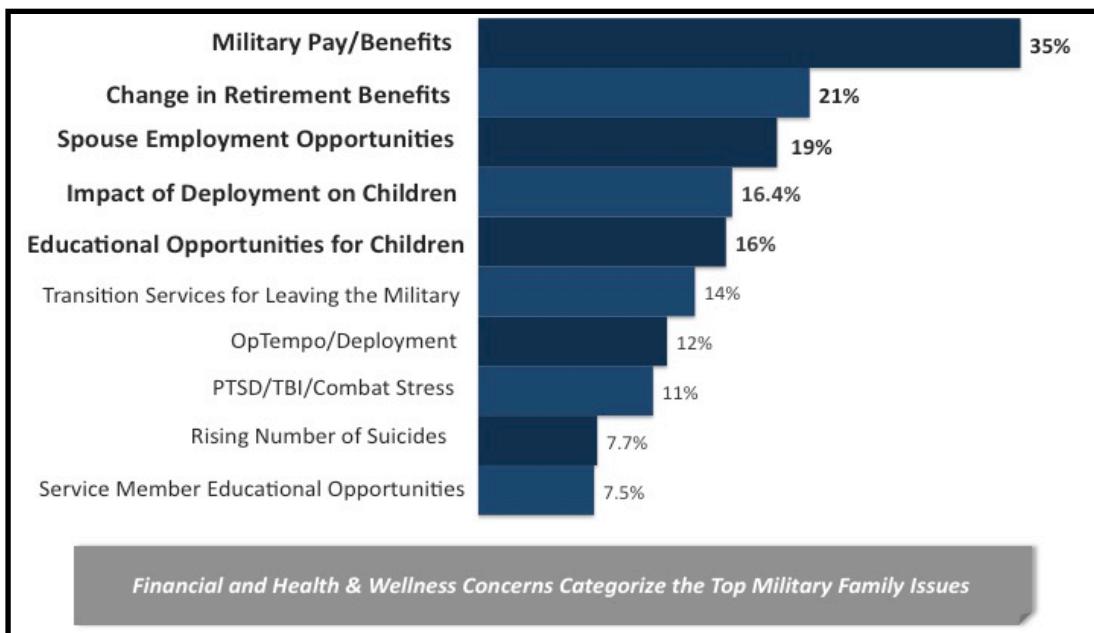
The 2013 Military Family Lifestyle Survey, conducted online in November 2012 with more than 5,100 military family respondents, was designed to reveal key trends in today's military families by examining, among other things, feelings of stress, financial readiness, spouse employment, effects of deployment, levels of communication, behavioral and mental health wellbeing, and civic engagement. The results provide clear insight into the unique lifestyles of modern-day military families after more than a decade of continuous war.

This year, the top three military family issues surrounded concerns of financial well-being. They were: Military Pay/ Benefits (35%), Change in Retirement Benefits (21%), and Spouse Employment Opportunities (19%). While spouse employment affects financial security throughout the service member's career, all three of these issues can be considered key to making a smooth financial transition out of the military. This is particularly noteworthy as estimates point to over one million service members transitioning off of active duty over the next five years. Following these fiscally oriented concerns, the next two top issues for survey respondents centered on the children of service members, specifically the impact of serial deployments (17%) and educational opportunities (16%).

Additionally, the 2013 survey also uncovered valuable information on the following areas: relationships, suicide prevention, financial literacy, caregiving, communication, and public policy. This year's survey also continued to track how military families support each other, seek out resources, and stay connected to their communities and to their service members.

### What Are The Top Military Issues That Most Concern You?

Percentage of Respondents Ranking Issue #1



Similar to the general population,<sup>i</sup> financial uncertainty has become an important issue for survey respondents. When assessing the possibility of transitioning from active duty, service members' top concerns were employment

possibilities and loss of income. It is important to note that these two concerns have remained the same from 2012 to 2013, regardless of whether the service member had less than or more than twenty years of service. When assessing their top national concerns, the economy and job creation ranked number one and number two, respectively. It is clear that, regardless of time left in service, military members are focused on the state of the economy and concerned about their financial future.

Although both spouses and their active duty partners worry about job creation, concern among spouses exceeded that of service members' by six percentage points. Spouses also ranked "Spouse Employment Opportunities" second among current top military issues, while it was ranked third by all respondents. With interrupted education and career paths, the ability of spouses to contribute to a steady income stream during military service is often a challenge. Military spouse income contributions after active duty service may also be impacted due to lack of work experience and level of education.

The top five military family concerns help to identify some of the priorities and concerns of military families and shed insight into how policy makers can apply programs and resources towards these goals. It is notable that this year's survey saw, for the first time, Operational Tempo/ Deployment drop out of the Top 5 Military Issues. After over a decade of war, the military community has seen a drawdown of the total number of troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, and an increased focus on deployments in the Pacific. These operational trends could be associated with the change in respondents' priorities and may suggest that military families understand the DoD's shift in focus and the need to align resources with national defense priorities.

Furthermore, it is important to note that while the necessities of transitioning and adaptability have always been central themes and challenges of the military lifestyle, change is especially imminent inside the military community today and includes budget cuts, sequestration, changes to force structure, pay and benefits, and greater emphasis on the Pacific in addition to the Middle East. These changes, coupled with the unknown, final outcome of sequestration, have caused a level of uncertainty with unspecified impact on the military community, as well as the nation itself.

## **Top Issues**

### ***Pay/Benefits and Changes to Retirement Benefits:***

Thirty-five percent of respondents listed pay/benefits as their top military family life issue while 22% of respondents cited changes to retirement benefits as their top concern. When veterans were asked about concerns related to separating from the military, their top concerns were employment possibilities and loss of income.

### ***Military Spouse Employment:***

Sixty-eight percent of spouses reported that being a military spouse had a negative impact on their ability to pursue a career. Of the 61% who were not currently employed, 52% wanted to be. When asked their reasons for not working, 80% mentioned job market alignment. Twenty-three percent of spouses had faced challenges with their state licenses, certifications or other professional qualifications due to military-oriented moves across state lines at some point in their service member's career. Additionally, 26% currently operate their own business.

### ***Effects of Deployment on Military Child Emotional Well-being and Development:***

Sixty-seven percent of respondents reported having one or more children currently living at home who were under the age of 18. Of those children, 93% had lived at home during the deployment or routine separation of a military parent. When asked how their children had been affected by the military parent's deployment, anxiety was a predominant response. Thirty percent of respondents sought out mental health counseling services to address the negative emotional impact of deployment. Of those who sought services, 72% found it helpful. Sixty-one percent chose a civilian provider, while only 23% chose a military provider. Respondents also reported positive aspects of

their children's experiences in military life: 73% of respondents noted the adaptability of their children, 68% saw an increase in independence, 67% reported an increase in resilience, and 59% reported an increased sense of pride.

#### ***Military Child Education:***

Seventy-nine percent of respondents reported that their child's school engaged in parent/teacher conferences and 77% reported they were informed of school activities. However, 38% reported that the school was not aware of military life experiences such as transition and deployment and 39% did not feel their school was responsive or proactive to unique military situations. Fifty percent of respondents were unaware of the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children and only 29% of respondents reported that their school adhered to the interstate compact. Forty-seven percent of respondents were not aware of the School Liaison Officer program and only 25% reported that their schools were utilizing the Military SLOs. Thirty-three percent reported their school currently utilized peer support programs and 36% stated that deployment had negatively affected their children's participation in extra-curricular activities.

#### **Additional Findings Of Note**

##### ***Social Media:***

Seventy-two percent of respondents indicated that social media was important in communicating with their service member during deployment. Facebook became the most popular method of deployment communication in the 2013 survey, surpassing email 85% to 81%. Overall, 88% of respondents used social media to connect with friends or family who did not live near them and 61% used social media to connect to other military families. Additionally, while 61% said their service member's unit used email to disseminate information and 52% said the unit used Facebook, only 37% said they used social media to get updates from the unit. The top three resources for online information-gathering were split between official and non-official sources: Facebook, Military OneSource, and Military.com.

##### ***Financial Readiness and Health:***

Sixty-five percent of respondents said they experienced stress related to their family's current financial condition. The top three obstacles to financial security were: spouse employment (49%), uncertainty in military life (45%), and frequent moves (40%). When asked about financial education within the military community, only 12% of respondents received their financial education through service member training, while 90% said they wanted greater emphasis on preventative financial education. Eighty-seven percent of respondents used a household budget and 70% had checked their credit report or score in the past 12 months.

##### ***PTS/TBI/Combat Stress:***

Twenty-three percent of all respondents and 24% of spouse respondents reported PTS symptoms in their service member regardless of diagnosis whereas 19% of service members reported having a PTSD diagnosis and 21% reported symptoms regardless of diagnosis. Of those who reported that their service member had exhibited symptoms of PTS, 57% reported not seeking treatment through a military provider. Five percent of service members reported having been diagnosed with a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), and 4% of spouse respondents report their service members had exhibited symptoms of a TBI, regardless of diagnosis.

##### ***Military Suicide:***

Nine percent of military spouses and 18% of service members reported they had "ever considered suicide." Of those who reported having considered suicide, 30% of service members and 23% of spouses report not seeking suicide support services. Thirty-seven percent of respondents felt that the Department of Defense was handling the issue of suicide poorly. Respondents rated the following three topics as "very important" in preventing suicide: 1) counselors who understand the military lifestyle, 2) counselors who receive specialized training in how to work with service members and veterans, and 3) increased availability of mental health services.

##### ***Volunteerism and Civic Engagement:***

Engagement is a strong defining characteristic of the military community. Eighty-seven percent of respondents believed all Americans have a responsibility to participate in national service and 72% supported their service member's continued military service. Ninety-two percent of respondents were registered to vote, and 91% voted in the last presidential election. While 83% expressed satisfaction with the military lifestyle, 23% were enthusiastic promoters of military service, meaning they would recommend joining the military to their child or another young person. Active recommendation of service was captured using the Net Promoter Score methodology, which categories organizational loyalty into three types of people: promoters, passively satisfied, and detractors.

#### ***Exceptional Family Member Program (EFMP):***

Nineteen percent of respondents had a family member enrolled in the EFMP. The top two supports for families were the chain of command and the local community. Respondents "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that some of the main challenges associated with moving for families with exceptional family members were finding new doctors (68%), obtaining educational accommodations (66%), and access to respite care (66%). Sixty-four percent of respondents reported difficulty accessing community-/state-based supports such as Medicaid waiver benefits.

#### ***Public Policy – Don't Ask Don't Tell:***

For the second year in a row, a majority of respondents felt the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT) had no impact on a variety of issues. Seventy-five percent of respondents said it had no impact on their service member's ability to do his/her job and 72% said it had no impact on their service member's desire to re-enlist or stay in the military. Sixty-five percent said it had had no impact on their service member's morale and 62% said the repeal had no impact on mission readiness or national security. Seventy-one percent said it had had no impact on their desire to attend social functions and 64% of spouses said it had had no impact on their military support group's morale.

### **The Civic Lives of Service Members and Their Families**

In the past, researchers have defined "community" based on concepts of geographic location, political affiliation, and even psychological attachments.<sup>ii</sup> Within the military context, the concept of "community" often crosses the boundaries of geography. However, while military families use technology to feel close to each other and their service members across time zones, they also rely on geographically based connections to plug into resources, information, and support locally. In this survey, geographically and psychologically influenced engagement was expressed in a variety of pro-social behaviors: volunteerism, relationships with neighbors, voting behavior, and charitable acts.

#### **Engagement and Volunteerism**

This year, in order to align our research on the civic health of the military community to the National Conference on Citizenship's (NCOC) *Civic Health Index*,<sup>iii</sup> many questions from the 2012 survey were adapted and/or changed, which makes trending data from the 2012 survey impossible for those questions. Our intent is to develop insight into the military lifestyle as compared to the broader national population, with particular focus on assessing how the beneficial effects of service to civil society are manifesting in our military population.

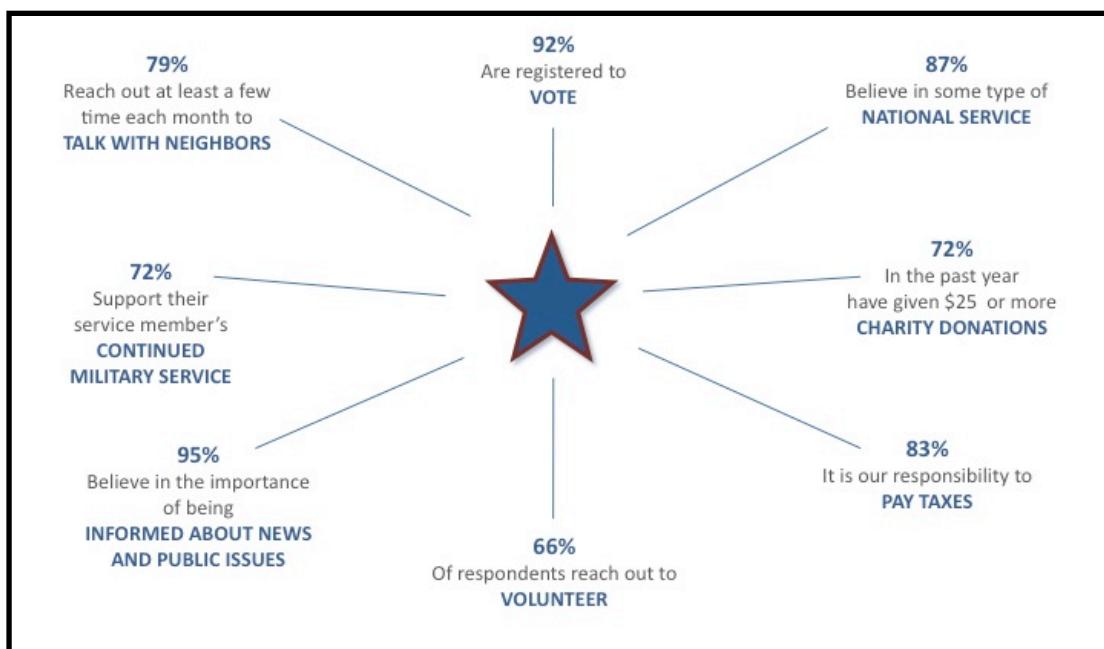
This year's survey showed that 66% of respondents had volunteered through a formal organization within the last year. Twenty-four percent volunteered 6-10 hours each month, which roughly equates to one traditional full workday. Twelve percent volunteered for more than 30 hours each month, approximately the equivalent of a part-time job. Forty-four percent of military parents volunteered at their children's school or another educational group, giving further support to the role of schools as a hub of community activity for military families, much like NCOC finds in the general population.<sup>iv</sup> The top outlets for volunteerism among military families were via military spouse organizations (44%) and other types of military-related organizations (21%). A remaining 21% were split among other volunteer outlets such as religious and faith-based groups.

Notably, respondents had strong agreement on the concepts of patriotism and citizenship. The most popular reason for joining the military was “to serve his/her country” (96%), with educational benefits coming in second at 74%. Eighty-seven percent believed in some type of national service either via the military or through other national service options. When asked about other civic responsibilities, reporting a crime (99%), paying taxes (98%), voting (97%), staying informed (95%), knowing English (91%), and volunteering (91%) were rated as important. Seventy-two percent supported the continued military service of their service members.

Even with the frequent moves associated with the military lifestyle, respondents indicated being tied into their local neighborhoods. Fifty-five percent said they trust “all or most” of the people in their neighborhoods, while 34% said that “some” of the people in their neighborhoods could be trusted. Ninety-two percent of respondents were registered voters, and 91% participated in the last general election. While 23% said they do not cast local ballots because of lack of community knowledge, 53% said they stayed informed about local politics no matter where their duty stations are.

When talking about politics, 88% never participate in marches, rallies, or demonstrations. However, this lack of public positioning should not be considered a general lack of engagement, as 76% chose to express their opinions in the confines of family or friendships at least once or month or more frequently. The internet also provides an outlet for expressing options about political or community issues, and 41% of respondents participated via this platform at least once per month as well.

### Highlights of Civic Engagement



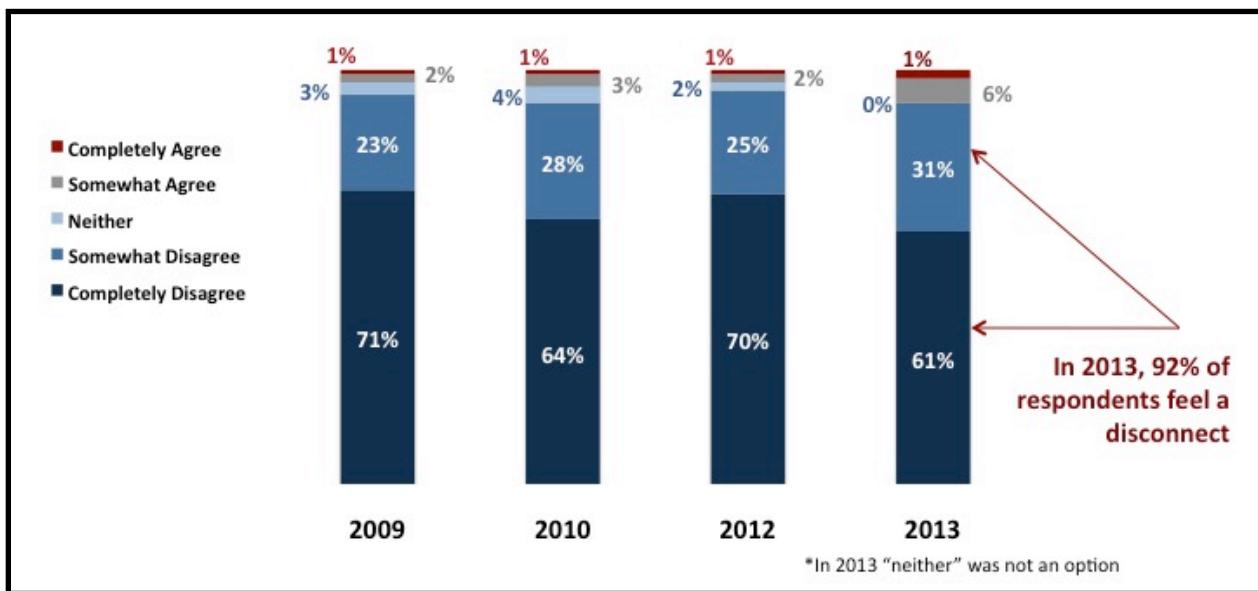
### Joining Forces to Bridge the Civilian-Military Divide

This year’s findings continued to indicate a distinctive civilian-military cultural divide.<sup>v</sup> Eighty-eight percent of respondents disagreed with the statement, “The general public is aware of the impacts of military service on military families.” And, 92% disagreed with the statement, “The general public truly understands the sacrifices made by service members and their families.” Pew Research Center’s 2011 survey results were comparable and showed 84% of modern-era veterans felt that the general public does not have an understanding of the problems that those in the military face.<sup>vi</sup>

Previous research has sought to identify specific mediating approaches for linking and interfacing informal networks with local communities to bridge this unfortunate and unproductive gap and much recent programming has been developed with the specific aim of decreasing it. The *Joining Forces* initiative has been focused on building bridges between the civilian community and military members and their families while leveraging the best of the public, private, and non-profit sectors have to offer. Having just celebrated its second anniversary, *Joining Forces* has demonstrated the value of collaboration with successes surrounding military spouse and veteran employment and military child education. However, there is still a long way to go. While traction is being made with regard to awareness of the sacrifices made by service members and their families, seven in 10 Americans say that it is “just part of being in the military.”<sup>vii</sup>

### To What Extent Do You Agree With The Statement:

***“The general public (without close ties to the military) truly understands the sacrifices made by service members and their families.”***



### Conclusion

The end of the era of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars is very welcome by military families, but it is not an end to the challenges of the military lifestyle. Service members and their loved ones know that we live in a dynamic and unpredictable world. Nearly 70,000 remain deployed in Afghanistan, tens of thousands of others continue to deploy in every time zone; the future is unknown but will almost certainly be challenging. The nation will continue to move and use its military; while at the same time, because of budget constraints and shifting missions, funding for many aspects of military work and life will be cut, and many who wish to continue to serve in military will instead be part of the drawdown.

Since this survey was administered, the impact of sequestration has been notable in the form of deployment cancellations and delays; but there have also been increased uncertainties with scheduled PCS moves, and DoD schools are enduring budget cuts and furloughs that are impacting the education of our children. As readers review this report, survey responses and interpretations should be made with today’s current events in mind.

A positive by-product of these past years is that policy-makers have come to understand military families’ needs and concerns much better. The military services initiated many good programs for families. Yet many of these programs now face cuts. Particularly in the face of sequestration, military families and service members anxiously wait to see

how they will be personally affected by the changes. We are experiencing a confluence of factors: shifting missions, budget cuts, and a military community still processing the effects of more than a decade of war.

Thoughtful action now requires careful, data-driven allocation of resources, creative collaboration across the public and private spheres (such as those initiated by *Joining Forces*) and including the military family as a partner in identifying their keenest challenges, their strengths, and the best programs for helping strengthen this community for the future. Because the military services will be unable to fund all the support that military families need, and because in many cases military families do not prefer to seek support services from within Department of Defense resources, the connection between military families and their local communities is of increasing importance. So it continues to be a concern that military families consistently express a sense of alienation from the larger community.

The results of this survey are intended, in part, to bridge that gap, by providing concrete information about the unique aspects of military life and to bring awareness to the strengths and contributions of the military service culture to American life. After all, it has been shown that a strong sense of community can directly contribute to positive family adaptation as it “reflects the meaning that people attach to their interactions with others, whether these others are part of formal support (the unit) or part of informal support (friends, etc).”<sup>viii</sup>

With the wheels of transition in motion, **Blue Star Families** challenges the readers of this report to take these results and use them to align their resources by “doing more with less,” just as military service members and their families always have done both in operations and on the homefront. Perhaps the biggest challenge, to not only the military but also to the country, is how we can create and adapt our support structures and community capacity to be better serving of our active duty forces and then propel a generation of veterans into areas where their strong sense of duty can be applied to benefit the future of our nation.

## Summary Recommendations

- Create tri-sector partnerships engaging all segments of society towards the issues mentioned in the report (education, jobs, benefits, mental health, etc.) convened at the local and regional level, and coordinated with the existing federal programs; leveraging informal social networks and community capacity so the services are seamless, accessible, and relevant.
- Promote proactive and transparent dissemination of information (through a variety of official and un-official platforms) about programs, benefits, and services to service members, veterans, and military families, especially as it relates to budgetary shifts and changes to programming.
- Design specific and targeted tracking and monitoring of resources for military family members with regard to mental health, employment, and childcare. Prioritize strategic allocation of resources across the military community recognizing the unique role that family members play in supporting national defense. This would include ensuring access to mental health benefits, access to quality education regardless of location, and supporting partnerships that enable families’ access to childcare and transitional resources in civilian communities.
- Support targeted research and dissemination of results, leveraging public/private partnerships (e.g., academic, private foundations, military treatment hospitals, and other government agencies) to examine the effects of military affiliation on service members and their families, including relationships, financial security, and mental health, and well-being. Leverage research to develop evidence-based training, resources, and programming or identify current programs that can be scaled and replicated. The findings of such research will also help to inform national discourse and decrease the civilian-military divide.

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- <sup>viii</sup> Bowen, G. et al., (2003), p. 41.

**For more information or to volunteer with Blue Star Families, please visit  
[www.bluestarfam.org](http://www.bluestarfam.org).**

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